

Briefing Paper: Home Education/Children Missing Education

Background

The Children's Commissioner's report, 'Invisible Children' (2019), highlighted that 58,000 children nationally were being home schooled. Essex had also noted an increase in the number of those home-schooled over recent years, whilst colleagues in other counties were reporting increases in their home education figures. This pattern was certainly not specific to Essex and appeared to be a national trend which, some may argue, is linked to the ease with which parents can opt to remove their child from a school roll in favour of elective home education. As a result of these factors, a Cross Party Working Group was established to investigate the impact that this was having within Essex and establish means by which this may be addressed, both to manage the issue and provide assistance to parents when they are considering home education.

It was established that children can be outside of the mainstream education system for several reasons (including exclusion from school), but mostly due to parents choosing to home school their children. The Group were, of course, supportive of parents who wish to home educate their children, as this is something parents are entitled to do. However, the concern was around how easy it is for parents to take their children out of school under the reason of home education and issues relating to schools 'off-rolling' pupils, where schools actively encourage parents to home educate. The biggest difficulty is tracking these children and ensuring that the education they are receiving is of a good quality and in line with their age, ability and aptitude.

There are a lack of statutory powers available to local authorities to ensure that we have oversight of the system. As a result, there are considerable variations across local authority areas with regards to support for parents who elect to home school and monitoring oversight (which, legally, can only be undertaken if a referral of concern is raised to the LA). This would suggest that some local authorities are more effective at providing support and monitoring provision for this cohort when compared with others. Indeed, some families that move from one local authority area to another will comment on the lack of consistency in respect of the approach taken and support available. The chairman of the Cross Party Working Group raised these issues with Nick Gibb as a concern.

In January 2020, the Cross Party Working Group submitted a report, requesting that the government consider a number of concerns that the Group had identified, through discussions and data analysis and for which a number of solutions had been put forward to enable local authorities to achieve better consistency in the way in which they work to safeguard this specific cohort of children and young people.

Post Covid Update

Essex, like many local authorities, noted a significant rise in the number of children and young people registered as EHE as a direct result of Covid-related anxiety within families across the county. At the start of the academic year 2020/21 there were

1730 children and young people registered as EHE within Essex. This figure rose to 2629 by the end of the academic year.

Whilst, at the start of this new academic year, it is clear that some families are now seeking to return their child/ren back to a school roll, as their Covid-related anxieties reduce, it is apparent that some families will continue to exercise their right to home educate their child/ren on a longer-term basis. With our local home educated cohort remaining above 2200 at this time, the need for increased safeguarding measures and powers to enable us to better safeguard and protect the educational rights of this cohort remains a priority.

The House of Commons' Education Committee Report, "Strengthening Home Education" (published 26 July 2021), echoed many of the concerns and included many of the recommendations that Essex County Council and the original Cross Party Working Group had been highlighting at every available opportunity in recent years. Whilst the Education Committee's Report positively highlights some of the key concerns that were investigated and addressed as part of the original Cross Party Working Group's submission to government in January 2020, Cllr Tony Ball was keen to re-form a Cross Party Group to coordinate shared, ongoing concerns in relation to this cohort of children and young people and to consider this recent Education Committee report and put forward a collaborative response to the Chair of the Education Committee, Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP.

The Cross Party Working Group, chaired by Cllr Tony Ball, met for the first time in late July 2021 and agreed to work collaboratively to fully consider and respond to the Education Committee's recent report, focussing on the recommendations therein and making suggestions as to how practices may be updated, nationally, to address some of the concerns and achieve some of the key recommendations set out within the report.

Weekly meetings of the Cross Party Working Group are underway and a response is being developed, taking into consideration the main concerns which have been flagged by local home educating families and professionals in this field during recent times. The deadline for producing and submitting the Group's collaborative response has been set for the end of October 2021.